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THE GIFT OF
JAMES MORGAN HART
PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ENGLISH PROSE
STYLE.

THE
CHANCELLOR'S ESSAY,
1881.

Charles Robert Leslie BY
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“Indeed, nobody now talks of style, everyone
composes pretty well.”

BOSWELL’S JOHNSON, *Croker’s Edition*,
(Vol. 4, p. 103).

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ENGLISH PROSE STYLE.

If we see the "spirit" of a nation most faithfully embodied in its poetry, it is in the prose literature that we must look for the less glowing but more accurate reflection of its "genius." Introduction.

Poetry for the most part is the result of spasmodic outbursts, consequent upon fits of national self-consciousness, such as are caused by a sudden opening up of new foreign relations, or by successful wars: fits like these are intermittent; when the pulse of the nation has ceased to beat Prose as opposed to Poetry. with feverish activity poetry will probably be comparatively neglected; whereas prose being the vehicle of all natural thought will, among a people which is making steady progress towards self-education, maintain a more even course of development. No doubt in a minor degree the prose literature of a country will always reflect passing phases of national character, and it would be unsafe to lay down any very formal generalization on the point; but the distinction just given seems to be the usual one between metrical and unmetrical composition, viewed as factors in history.

Perhaps, too, this is the cause why poetry has in all great nations been an earlier growth than prose. The fits of self-consciousness to which I have referred often come upon a people long before there is any vestige of education abroad. Nay, often before a language has been formed at all; for it is generally in the very dawning of the idea of nationality that a language springs up, and then poetry sometimes consciously forces upon its readers a speech, which is to become common to the nation, and which is as yet quite imperfect; one need only call to mind Chaucer and Dante, the latter of whom is said to have hesitated whether he should choose Provençal or Sicilian as the material out of which he was to fashion a language. It is an indisputable fact that nearly all national literatures—that is, literatures which

Prose does not inaugurate new languages: but waits until the language has been formed.

have not been transplanted half-grown from foreign soils—have begun in some great poem, and that prose has followed at a respectful distance of time. The Homeric poems preceded the history of Herodotus, the Edda preceded the Sagas, and the *Divina Commedia* preceded the *Decamerone*.

The sequence of poetry and prose in England. The direct sequence of the two kinds of composition is not so clear in the history of English literature; Chaucer is far before any *literary* prose writer, and he is perhaps to be considered as much the founder of our modern tongue as Dante is of Italian, but we cannot shut our eyes to the fact that he himself wrote more than one of the "Canterbury Tales" in prose, and that Sir John Mandeville, who translated into English his own Latin account of a life of perhaps slightly imaginary travel in "Cathay" and other uncertain regions, actually lived before Chaucer.

Besides the English tracts of Wycliffe, the 14th and 15th centuries produced several minor compositions in the various dialects of our mother tongue; but it is not until the impetus given to learning by the Renaissance had produced a high level of education among the upper classes that any real literary prose can be considered to have existed. The reason of this delay in the development of the English language as the means of expressing the thoughts of educated people is an obvious and simple one, namely, the constant use of Latin as the universal medium of thought. This was owing primarily to the influence of the Roman Church which still continues to employ Latin in its diplomatic communications: but even when the religious barriers to free thought were to a certain extent broken down,—a process which was going on in England in a greater or less degree from the end of the 14th century,—the interest which all intelligent people felt in the rich mines of learning, which began to be opened to the Western world even before the fall of Constantinople, and the rage for unearthing old MSS. of the classics which immediately set in, rendered almost necessary the maintenance of some common speech in which the disciples of learning could be understood by their brethren of all nationalities. Thus the Renaissance may be said in one aspect to have retarded the growth of national literatures.

Division of the Subject. In attempting to give a picture of a national literature, which possesses a continuous history, we naturally meet with divisions indicated ready to our hands, and where such landmarks exist it is extremely difficult to avoid following them. It is only by tracing out some broad divisions of English literature that we hope to arrive at a comprehension of the changes which the style of our prose writing has undergone.

The main divisions, then, into which I intend to let the subject fall, though it may seem rather a fanciful arrangement, are marked off, not so much by different classes of prose writers, as by the different classes of those for whom prose has been written ; the gradual expansion of what has been called the “ literary public ” will afford the best basis upon which to work : and this expansion, though in the main steady and continuous, having been helped or retarded by its several exterior influences, admits of two distinct lines of demarcation, which give us three distinct classes of readers. To each of these classes will be found assigned, as if by a natural law, a tolerably distinct class of writers.

Three periods of English readers, and consequently three periods of English writers.

I.—In the early days of English prose literature—and it does not seem desirable to date the commencement of such before Sir Thomas More—books were written only for scholars ; the style was a scholarly style ; their authors loaded them with quotations from the classics, as if pre-supposing the ability of their readers to understand them. The revival of classical learning and its patronage by Henry VIII. and his nobles had produced a very considerable if superficial knowledge of ancient literature among the courtiers and the circles of society near the court. Henry’s son, and one at least of his daughters, extended their influence in the same direction, so that by the end of Elizabeth’s reign, there may be said to have been a very considerable number of people qualified to understand scholarly books. To suit this audience the style of the age was modelled. Prose literature in this first period is a fine art.

First period, 1500—1660.

The reading public consists of scholars.
Prose writing is a fine art.

II.—The unpopularity of the court and the church, during the reigns of the first two Stuarts, seems to have retarded the expansion of this literary public, but with the restoration, contemporaneously with the appearance of foreign influences, we find visible traces of the growth of a much larger class of readers. This second class is composed of people whom we may describe as men of the world, the germ of that society which became the audience of Addison, Steele, and Bolingbroke, the society of which “ Esmond ” gives us so delightful a picture. To meet the wants of this audience a new literature and a new class of authors arose. These men were writers for bread. Prose literature, without entirely ceasing to become a fine art has become a profession.

Second period, 1660—1800.

The reading public consists of men of the world.
Prose writing is still a fine art, but has become a profession.

III.—The third and last class of people for whom English prose has been written, is really

Third period, 1800.

The reading public of the last period is vastly extended, even to admit uneducated people.

Prose writing is a factor in the National Education.

only a vast expansion of the second; but it is distinctly marked off from its predecessor by the increased demand for a more popularised English literature, which followed the extension of English interest in the outside world after 1815. This interest has gone on expanding with great rapidity to our own day. It is this class which constitutes the reading public of the present generation. We live in an atmosphere eminently unproductive of literary giants, for "that which was once the heritage of the few has suffered in its distribution among the many;" but we have abundance of writers who satisfy the wants of this increasing class of readers. Prose is now written for everybody, and has become an important factor in the national education.

Continuity of the development of our prose style.

While the literature of some countries springs at once into full stature, in others it is slowly matured by steps, of which every one can be traced. The arrangement of writers into three divisions, above given, shows that England possesses a fairly continuous development of literary prose. Our prose has had no "cataclysms" such as came over our poetry in the 15th and 18th centuries.

Entirely national and free from foreign influences. flences we cannot call it, for besides the revival of classical learning which gave it its first impetus, there was a marked period of Italian influence in the middle of the 16th century, and a marked period of French in the latter half of the 17th. But it is very doubtful whether any literature, except that of the Scandinavian nations, has ever been quite isolated, and certainly it would seem a very questionable benefit for any literature to be so. In what direction we are tending at the present day, when national education is beginning to be a reality, I shall endeavour to point out after a brief examination of the three periods above mentioned.^a

I.—I do not propose to trace the development of English prose literature from an earlier date than the commencement of the first of these three periods, that is from the rise of an English

^a NOTE.—It is somewhat strange to notice that the one ancient prose literature which, brief as its life was, developed itself by regular steps to a very high point of splendour, namely the Athenian, took the very opposite direction from that which English is now following. We are, perhaps, in danger of forgetting form in our superabundance of matter, whereas the oratory of the Athenian law courts (the school in which prose reached its most admirable style), having been raised to the highest scientific form, lost its use for practical purposes. The influence which was exercised by the speeches, both in the *ἐκκλησίᾳ*, and in the law courts, could only exist in a small and thoroughly self-conscious community such as Athens. Sheridan and perhaps Erskine have left their mark upon English prose, but it is rather from an external point that they have done so; they have not assisted at the making of the language. [See on the question Jebb's *Attic Orators*.]

literary public, however narrow. Before the opening of the 16th century there was no such body of men in existence, and even in the early years of the Renaissance it was very small. The first violent conflict of the Reformation was not a literary strife, except in so far as the ends of the two parties were promoted or retarded by published writings ; it was a war of religious pamphlets, none of which are a model of good English, and of which the success depended to some extent on their author's command of strong language. However striking and pithy are some of Latimer's rude sentences, however perspicuous some of the earlier ecclesiastical documents, such as the first book of homilies, they cannot be said to have contributed to the development of English prose style to any considerable extent.

First period, 16th century.

Effect of Reformation on our prose literature.

But of the predecessors of Hooker, who is generally considered the first real writer of "style," we may select Sir Thos. More, Roger Ascham, John Lily, and perhaps the Jesuit, Father Parsons (the last on the authority of Swift), as the four greatest masters of their native language. The "Life and Times of King Edward V." is really a classical work, and "Utopia" has been said by Professor Minto to be almost an English classic. The meaning of the last statement of course is that the "Utopia" expresses most clearly the ideas which would be current in the mind of the most highly cultivated English intellect of the day, and it does not refer to the style ; although the translation of 1552, in which form most people are acquainted with More's little work, is certainly a marvel of lucidity and beauty for its age. More is altogether before his time, so far as anyone can be said to occupy such a position, both in his thoughts and in his methods of expressing them. For nearly a hundred years afterwards we do not meet with such a vigorous, perspicuous, and above all such an evidently thoughtful style. He was perhaps one of the few men of the 16th century who had any command over their pens, who wrote as they thought ; and his thoughts must have been always clear as they were always noble. I do not wish to attempt anything like a series of quotations even from the most representative authors, but I cannot refrain from inserting a few lines from a letter from More to his wife which is given in Mr. Baptiste Scoone's^b delightful collection :

" He sent us all that we have lost ; and sith He hath by such a chance taken it away again His pleasure be fulfilled. Let us never grudge thereat but take it in good worth and heartily thank Him as well for adversity as for prosperity. And perchance we have more cause to thank Him for our loss than

^b "Four Centuries of English Letters."

“ for our winning. For His wisdom better seeth what is good
“ for us than we do ourselves.”

These few lines of consolation for a domestic misfortune are as far superior in point of what we now consider good style, to the laboured writings of the next century and a half, as they are superior in their spirit of resignation to the temper of the age in which they were written. One can hardly blame the somewhat excessive use of abstract ideas in which More indulges, when one reflects on his philosophical and thoughtful nature. He uses in his “*Edward V.*” a more practical and more concrete language than any other writer before Dryden.

Sir Thomas Elyot. But More was an isolated phenomenon in Henry VIII. reign. The only other writer of the period whose work is worthy of remark in the history of English prose is Sir Thomas Elyot, whose “*Boke of the Goverour*” shews a distinct purpose of building up a good vocabulary. His merit lies chiefly in this that he saw clearly that there was a multitude of English ideas, which could never be expressed by terms built up on purely English roots, and he therefore consciously adopted many Latin words and phrases into his mother tongue.^c But his sentences are exceedingly involved and obscure, and he evidently wrote with great labour to himself. Soon after Italian influence. his time we begin to see traces of the influence of Italy. These came no doubt in the wake of those scholars who had gone, like Grocyn and Linacre in the early years of the century, to learn Greek in the land where it was taught best, and had brought back with them a tinge of the pedantic blight which was rapidly overclouding the brilliant summer of Italian culture; Roger Ascham. although Ascham, like Elyot, distinctly sets before himself the determination to study the English language with a view to composition as a fine art, and bears few marks of the influence of foreign pedantry.

John Lily. Euphuism was probably the fashionable Court dialect before Lily's time, but Lily being a master of the style, his novel was taken as typical, and gave its name to the language which we find so ably satirised by Scott in the character of Sir Piercie Shafton. The criticisms of Sidney, and indeed his own prose, although diffusive and ill-connected, affords clear proof that the Euphuists were not entirely masters of the literary stage. But they left an enduring mark behind them:

Sidney, a critic of the Euphuists. “The absurd surfeit to the ears” of which Sidney accuses Lily of being the author, was toned down into the rich and melodious style of

^c NOTE.—This process went on throughout the 18th century, every writer adding a little to the stock of Latin words grafted on the English language; so that where the Wiclf Bible has the “again-rising of doom,” the A. V. has “resurrection of damnation.”

Hooker, and gave rise to much of the fanciful word play of Jeremy Taylor, who is said to have exceedingly admired Lily's writings.

John Lily was a few years younger than Richard Hooker, but the "Euphues" was published in 1579 and 1580, whereas the "Ecclesiastical Polity" was not written till the later years of Hooker's life, and was given to the world in 1594. The publication of this book is said to mark an era in English prose: this is true so far as it is the first instance of pure prose applied to an important literary purpose. The earlier part of Elizabeth's reign was a period of stirring activity; the nation was on the tiptoe of expectancy; it was starting in the great race of foreign adventure, was at the same time engaged in a struggle against the overshadowing might of Spain, and yet at home felt itself by no means secure from revolution. It would not have been unlikely that England should awake one morning to find Elizabeth assassinated and Mary on her march to London: ecclesiastical controversies were also very rife, and had to be conducted in the most hurried manner conceivable. All this retarded the tranquillity which is inseparable from an Augustan age; but with the later years of the Queen's reign there came a period of triumph abroad and security at home, under a very fairly liberal government, which was eminently favourable to such a development. The great Augustan age of France on the other hand sprang from the peace of despotism, following soon after civil war; and, in consequence, French Literature took a different turn from English. The so-called Augustan age of Anne bore in truth little resemblance to its fancied model: it was rather, as I have said above, a period in which, the habit of reading having been extended to a larger class of people than before, style had been compelled to descend from its stilts to suit its paces to the public taste. But the age of Hooker and Bacon was truly an Augustan age, as much in the bold flights of rhetoric of the one, as in the heroic researches into science of the other.

Hooker is one of the few instances of a writer whose fame rests almost entirely on his style; indeed there seems to be a little else new or original in his works, except the studied moderation and fairness with which he wrote. It is the extraordinary richness of his language, and certain distinct steps which he took towards what is called a "periodic" style, which has earned him the excessive praise bestowed by Hallam, and Mr. Ruskin's declaration that he has consciously endeavoured to make the "Ecclesiastical Polity" his model. The beautiful flow of Hooker's words reflects the serenity of his temper; he was exceedingly fond of music; he lived a retired life

Why a literary prose was delayed until the later years of Elizabeth's reign.

Favourable conditions of the later years of Elizabeth.

The writers thereof form an "Augustan Age."

Hooker's style.

He is the inventor of "periodic" style.

in a beautiful country, he wrote in a peaceful decade, every-
thing indeed worked together for him in favour of successful
composition. His sentences are finished and neat, but clearness
of expression and adherence to one definition were things unknown
to the writers of the 16th century; and Hooker is no exception
to the rule. The best instance of this is the loose rendering of
words in the translations from Latin which abound in his work;
Hooker seems to have been aware of this fault, but to have been
incapable of correcting it. It was not that men's thoughts were
confused in those days, but that their pens had not learnt to follow
their thoughts.

Most of Bacon's best work was written after 1620,
Francis Bacon. that is to say the "Advancement of Learning," his
"History of Henry VII.," and his "Essays." To attempt any-
thing like criticism of these splendid monuments of our language
would be quite in vain: it will be enough to notice the salient
points in which his writings influenced the development of
English prose literature. In the matter of diction he uses more
obsolete words than either Hooker or Sidney, but he is immeasur-
ably superior to them both in the perspicuity of his sentences
which, though occasionally involved, as a rule allow us to see into
his thoughts with great distinctness. The aphoristic style
of his essays is worthy of all praise, and he may be considered
the first English master of antithesis: it was perhaps his work in
this direction which gave his peculiar bent to the literature of the
early part of the 17th century. The men of that age delighted in
a neatly balanced, if somewhat pedantic and laboured, antithetical
construction. In spite of his obsolete words and Latinisms he
is easy to comprehend, because he is neither an affected nor an
emotional writer. His cold nature and judicial mind repelled
both these faults, and his labours might have been employed with
the greatest advantage on valuable historical investigations had he
not been engaged in the still more precious discoveries of natural
science.

Other writers of the
Augustan Age.

Pulpit eloquence.

To the same Augustan age belong the great
divines who made the English pulpit famous for
excellent logic, and for the fanciful quotations
from Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, with which they
regaled the ears of even the most rustic audiences:
it could not be supposed that these would be understood, but the
ecclesiastics of that day seem to have considered that they were
bound to show their knowledge of the dead languages, and the
people seem to have looked for this display of superior erudition
in their pastors as a necessity of each Sunday. Nothing shows
more clearly than the style of sermons the change which had
come over the religious life of England since the stirring days of
Latimer; in his time it was necessary to excite powerfully the
feelings of the people, and hence his coarse and homely language

was uttered with a most forcible delivery, such as we do not meet with again until the sonorous periods of the learned and refined Carolian divines have been drowned in the rising tumult of civil war. The most representative of these preachers and writers were Lancelot Andrewes, Dr. Donne, and perhaps ^{Bp.} Lancelot Andrewes. Jeremy Taylor, who, though of a younger generation, belonged in all his ideas no less than in his style to the later years of Charles I. reign. Andrewes will be chiefly remembered as one of the translators of the Bible into the form which we now use. The various translations ^{The translation of the Bible.} of this book are usually regarded as having been landmarks in the development of English style. The authorized version of 1611 has been said to be a typical specimen of the purest period of English, the reign of King James I. Whether the age of King James is the purest age of our mother tongue or not, it is certainly an error to say that the translation of 1611 is typical of the age in which it was drawn up; this version was issued professedly and closely on the lines of the somewhat faulty version then in use, known as the "Bishop's Bible," which had been put forward under the supervision of Matthew Parker forty years before; that version again had been copied as nearly as possible from Cranmer's translation: in each case faults were corrected, and many obsolete words were omitted, but little modernising of the style took place. A comparison of that portion of our Bible which reads most like a modern book with the language of Bacon will at once dispel the illusion that the language of the authorised version is the language of King James' time. On the anti-Erastian side, while ecclesiastical controversy was yet dignified, we find the names of Chillingworth and Hales. Chillingworth and Hales, who being scholars rather than fanatics, and not being trammelled by blind obedience to any theories, escaped the errors, both of matter and style, which soon became common to the violent partisans of either view.

We must not omit to notice Lord Herbert ^{Lord Herbert of Cherbury.} of Cherbury's admirable history of Henry VIII., which is undoubtedly the best work of its kind before the Restoration: the English is a model of purity, and perhaps the very best prose, in the sense of being most comprehensible to modern ears, before Dryden's; the periods are well constructed, though not quite so abundant in antithesis as those of Bacon.

There have been two great epochs in the history of the English pulpit; the first the one to which I have just referred, and the second that which followed soon after the Restoration, and which produced such men as Tillotson, South, and Burnet. The chronological link between these epochs is found in a man who in all but time belonged to the earlier of the two. Jeremy ^{Jeremy Taylor.} Taylor's style is the most perfect example of

"Linked sweetness long drawn out."

In him no less than in Hooker, language is but a reflection of one of the most beautiful characters with whom our history is furnished. His "Holy Living and Holy Dying" will always be recognised equally with the "De Imitatione Christi" as a perfect exposition of Christianity as it has appeared to the purest minds. But for our present purpose his "Liberty of Prophesying" is the school wherein the richness of diction of the pulpit oratory of his age may be studied to the most perfect advantage. His similes are never-ending, but he differs from his contemporaries in this that, though his classical learning is wide and varied, they are derived principally from external nature and from the deeper feelings of humanity rather than from books. So tender indeed are his expressions, that his style has been accused of a want of manliness and vigour.

Breach caused by
the Civil Wars in
the continuity of de-
velopement of prose
style.

The Civil Wars made a violent breach in the development of our literature : they brought to the top other elements, which during the long-rising excitement of the decades 1620—1640 had been preparing to break down the despotism of the Stuarts, and the laboured eloquence which while it had increased in refinement of form had rather lost in solidity of matter. Intellectual activity was indeed by no means completely interrupted in the same sense that Constitutional history was interrupted between 1640 and 1660, for the warfare was waged with the pen as well as with the sword, and to this we owe much of Milton's prose writing ; but such publications as exercised any influence on their respective causes were necessarily too hasty, too much coloured by the violent passions of the time, religious and political, to improve the English language. We must look backward to the age of Elizabeth and James, or forward to the Restoration, to find any very immortal specimen of our literature.

M. Taine on Milton. "I have before me," says M. Taine, "the formidable volume in which some time after "Milton's death his prose works were collected. What a book ! "The chairs creak when you place it on them, and a man who "turned over its leaves for an hour would have more pain in his "arm than in his head. As the book, so were the men," etc.^d

Milton as a prose writer. We can hardly expect from a Frenchman anything like a just estimate of the essentially English vigour of Milton's prose. The intellect of the great Puritan is quite foreign to the ideas of the most cultivated Frenchman. M. Taine, moreover, judges England and its literature from an ultra-French point of view: his work is even, considering the nationality of its author, exceedingly superficial. He has, however, plenty of astonished admiration for the "dis-

^d *Histoire de la Littérature Anglaise*, "tome 2, p. 435.

ciplined army of Milton's arguments," for the tremendous learning which he displays, and the magnificent claims for freedom which he advances. He compares him to Swift; then to a brazen trumpet; then to one of Michael Angelo's archangels; and finally concludes that he is not truly a prose writer; "imagination and enthusiasm have carried him away enchain'd into metaphor; "thus dazzled or marred he could not produce a perfect work, he "could but write useful tracts." That this is in many respects a fair criticism of Milton's prose cannot be denied, but his value in the eyes of Englishmen will always lie in the mere *strength* of his expressions. He first shewed what the force of English language was capable of. His style is involved and overloaded with imagery no less brilliant than Taylor's, while quite devoid of Taylor's harmony and sweetness: but the historical circumstances of the "Areopagitica" will always make it interesting, in spite of the rather "cramped hand," so to speak, in which its vehement language is confined. Milton owned himself that he had the use of prose writing only with his left hand.

Jeremy Taylor is really the last writer of the period which we have been considering, End of the first period. wherein the reading public was composed of men thoroughly learned according to the style of learning then prevalent in England: England was in his time already prepared to listen to something different from their "cumulative sentences," their tedious quotations, their once splendid but at last somewhat sickly exuberance of fancy; and to turn, if to writers of meaner language as of meaner moral stature, to writers in whom at least the man of the world was not wholly sunk in the man of literature.

II.—The reaction in French literature against the Italian affectations, which had become fashionable at Court when the influence of Mary de Medici was in the ascendant, was beginning some time before 1660, but it wanted expression until Boileau published his "Satires," which may be regarded as dealing a final blow to the extravagances of the "Precieuses." With the Restoration Influence of France, and especially of Boileau. in England, French influence streamed into the court life of St. James', and Boileau was almost immediately taken as a literary high priest in both countries. English writers, however, erred in relying on him too much, and following too closely the standard of classicalism, which he set up and which can be traced throughout the works of the writers of the "Age of Anne." From this time began in English prose literature that which M. Taine calls the "Classic Age."

Cowley had perhaps led the way in the reaction against the earlier style, but, easy and graceful as some of his essays are, it is not to him but to "Glorious John" Dryden that we must trace the true dawn of a

Dryden — the first professional author.

new era of English prose. Dryden is the first person who will write either poetry or prose to order with the most complete indifference, as he

is also the first of the "writers for bread," the first professional author.

There seems no reason to doubt that the transition of literature from a fine art to a profession must be accompanied with a deterioration both of style and matter; but at the period in question some popularisation was emphatically demanded on account of the increasing number of men and women who wanted to read books, and who were not educated up to the high standard of literature and scholarship of the preceding age. Dryden and his contemporaries, if they made style barer, also relieved it of many deformities, and kept up its harmony with the changing taste of the day, a harmony on which alone any sure foundation for national literature can be laid. These men made the writings and thoughts of the 18th century possible. Hooker is always addressing divines, Bacon always men of learning; Dryden is the first to address men of moderate education, practical and busy men of the world. And the men of the world aided the change which was going on. Conversation became an art; the age of drawing-rooms, and of the elegant discussion supposed to be inseparable from that species of chamber, set in: and, especially after the first excesses of the

He is the inventor of antithetic style. Restoration had passed off, indecent ideas began to be veiled under some pretence of decorum in speech. The prose writers of this time had a magnificent inheritance in the literature of the past, and they began accordingly to gather up the ideas of that literature, to polish them, and to adapt them to the style of conversation then current.

Mr. George Saintsbury's lofty claims for Dryden.

Mr. Saintsbury, in his newly-published sketch of Dryden, claims for him a higher merit even than the precedence in this literary change. He

declares that Dryden and Tillotson, working contemporaneously and in widely different fields of literature, really created the first English prose style, and averted the dangers which might have ensued from the involved constructions of the preceding writers. This seems to be rather an extravagant claim, and the danger to be rather imaginary: Dryden purified but he did not create English prose. His most obvious work lies chiefly in the fact that whereas up to his time every one had written in different styles he laid down the broad lines which became the common foundation for all English writers to work upon. Every one of his successors wrote like Dryden for a considerable period, until one by one the great leaders of the literary world modified and left their mark upon the language. Bolingbroke, Johnson, and Burke, all performed, in a much smaller degree and in

widely diverse directions, the work which Dryden had been the first to inaugurate.

The most lasting of Dryden's prose works are Dryden's criticisms. beyond doubt his literary criticisms. He was not a systematic feeder in the fields of earlier literature, but rather a critic by accident. The prefaces which he added to his plays are models of good working English as far removed from any exaggerated flights of rhetoric on the one hand as from any excessive use of colloquialisms on the other. Of a similar nature is his "Essay on Dramatic Poesy," which was published in 1665, and is thus one of the earliest specimens of the new style. The occasional insertion of a harmless colloquialism or trifling touch of pathos betray the hand of the man who is already master both of his thoughts and of his pen. Swift and Thackeray alone excel Dryden in this peculiar excellence. No one can throw in a political allusion with more effect except Swift himself. The prefaces to Dryden's later works, such as "Religio Laici," the translations of the *Aeneid*, and the dedication of his *Tables*, are among the most perfect of his specimens of prose. And yet with all this excellence it is extremely doubtful if he would ever have written a line of prose had he not been forced to affix prefatory notices to his dramas and translations, and to play the part of a literary critic in the dearth of any great demand for original literature.

From Dryden we pass almost at once to the first writers of the reign of Queen Anne, the men Connection between Dryden & Addison. who listened with reverence to the old literary lion in Wills' Coffee-house. There was indeed a direct and actual connection between the work of Dryden and Addison^e; but we must first glance at Sir William Temple, one of Sir William Temple. the earliest types of the school of the future. In reading the works of this "statesman turned pedant" we are in no danger of being over-excited or carried away into an un-critical enthusiasm: we shall not be led to form hasty judgments or to shut our eyes to the facts of history. The chief fear for a nineteenth century reader would be lest a certain drowsiness should be brought on by the monotonous smoothness of the periods, by the painful trimness of the verbiage; we can fancy the author wandering with a volume of the classics in his hand, through the green alleys of Moor Park, and smiling complacently at the thought that he who had been the counsellor of a Tory king and the friend of a Whig king had found metal more attractive in the designing of Dutch gardens and smooth sentences of English prose.

^e The latter is said to have written the preface to the Translation of the *Georgics*, usually believed to have been Dryden's [*Saintsbury*].

Shallowness of the early 18th century.

With all the trimness of morality and literature which men like Temple displayed to the world, the opening of the 18th century was a heartless age, an age without real religious life and without any deep intellectual life. One is sometimes tempted to think that the worst excesses of Charles II.'s early years were preferable to the cold and polished treachery both public and private with which London Society was honey-combed in the reigns of William and Anne. But there were two influences which saved both society and literature from dying of moral inanition ; the first of these was the splendid eloquence of the higher divines of the English Church, the successors of the great preachers of the age of Charles I., men like South, Barrow, Tillotson, Burnet, and Sherlock, whose reasonable and practical Christianity gradually brought about a regeneration of morality ; the other was the rise of a new set of models of style in the Parliamentary speeches, of which rumours began to be heard beyond the walls of St. Stephen's for the first time in the reign of Queen Anne. There is no doubt that though the eloquence of the pulpit and of the House of Commons operated but slowly in improving the style of prose writing on matters unconnected with Church or Parliament, yet they did operate in the long run in leading prose onwards from the cold and polished beauties of the style of Dryden and Addison to the more natural and forcible yet not less lofty forms of expression which were used by Burke.

The Essayists. But this is anticipating the change which was only gradual throughout the 18th century. I am not inclined to estimate very highly the style of the essayists of the reign of Queen Anne ; they have not left their mark upon the language to any great extent ; they did not aim at educating but only at amusing, because the contemporary public did not demand education so much as amusement ; and I do not think that, with the exception of Addison, their influence was

Addison. a highly moral one. His mind is indeed thoroughly brought before us in his style ; cold and cultivated, he is the man of success who has little pity for his erring brother who is not equally fortunate in the race of life. His essays are always fascinating to read, but one cannot help feeling that they were written by a man who had known little of the trials of the world, and who if he had any deep feelings, knew it to be his duty to crush them beneath an impassible

Steele. exterior. Steele's mind is a more attractive one, but he is in style a writer far less careful than Addison, and is even at times slipshod and uncultivated. But if they are neither of them models for imitation, which at one time it would have been the rankest heresy to assert, yet they form together with Swift and Defoe a distinct link in the

literary chain, and display several marked steps of advance beyond their predecessors.

Prose reached in the powerful pens of the two last-named writers a greater pitch of influence on the Government of England than it has attained at any other period of our history. These were the men who gave our literature its political cast, who made pamphlet writing a very important factor in the State: henceforward the party which could claim the services of an able pamphleteer would sooner have given up the head of its leader than the pen of its drudge. All work like this being done hastily naturally contributed little in matter to our store of valuable writings, but it certainly had a great influence in determining the direction which was to be followed in the development of style. Literature as a factor in politics is now-a-days much overwhelmed by mere force of what are called "brute votes;" and the wider the suffrage is extended, the less influence literature will possess, unless indeed education progresses at a rate proportionately faster than concessions to the spirit of democracy: but even upon the very brute votes themselves literature—the literature of the newspaper—does exercise an influence the direct origin of which can be traced back to the articles in the "Review" and the "Examiner," to pamphlets like the "Conduct of the Allies," and satires like the "True-born Englishman." The style of the newspaper is necessarily a popular one; repetition is not avoided, forcible expressions are introduced, and at the same time, newspaper and pamphlet writing, being intended for effect, must be free from all errors in diction, must be full of allusions to passing events, full even of personalities; and in short must be "trenchant," "slashing."

It is this quality of English prose which we owe to Defoe, and still more to Swift. Defoe was a hasty writer, and never corrected his sheets; Swift took infinitely more pains, and his labours were crowned with infinitely greater success. An instance of the immense power of such a style is the plain fact that Swift produced a Tory reaction in the middle of a Whig war, the most triumphant that England had ever been engaged in. This power was due to Swift's extraordinarily pictorial manner, to his mastery of literal, vivid, and coarse description. Carlyle is the only writer who has exercised an influence similar to that of Swift and Defoe, with minute detailed accounts of events. M. Taine speaks of the way in which Swift "decomposes" a subject into its elements. The pleasure which we derive from reading "Gulliver"—a pleasure which even all the loathsomeness of the book cannot destroy—is akin to that derived from "Robinson Crusoe" and "Sartor Resartus." We can hardly believe that the author has not been

Defoe and Swift.

The political nature
of English litera-
ture.

Newspaper style.

Swift.

an eye-witness of the details which he describes. Swift, Defoe, and Carlyle, "lie like truth."

The connecting link between authors of the age of Bolingbroke. Anne and authors of the age of our grandfathers is Lord Bolingbroke, whose earlier years were connected with schemes of re-establishing his own supremacy in England through a restoration of the old royal family, and whose later years were spent, like those of Macchiavelli, in discontented retirement among books and agricultural pursuits, for which he possessed as little aptitude as his great Florentine antitype. He was a philosopher by compulsion, who would have been all his life an orator if he had been more fortunate in his schemes. He belonged when he wrote his philosophical and political works, both in spirit and in style, to the days which were gone, although he lived far into the time during which Johnson was working as a literary hack for Cave. He is only important, with regard to his influence on the progressive development of style, because his speeches in Parliament, of which we unfortunately possess no remains, were looked back to in the days of Chatham and Burke as "more priceless than the 'lost fragments of antiquity.'" As a matter of fact, upon the development of genuine prose writing, oratory by itself can Parliamentary Oratory. exercise but an external influence. In those days especially, speeches in Parliament were addressed rather to the ear than to the eye; and to the ears only of those actually present when they were spoken; hence tautology, tricks of phrase, tricks of manner, *ὑπόκρισις* were of much more importance than a lucid practical style, such as is considered the perfection of prose writing, and such as is now addressed even from the benches of the Houses of Parliament to the audience of the nation. However carefully considered a speech might be beforehand, words might always be dropped during the debate which would cause the speaker to shift his ground, or oblige him to alter some cherished aphorism, which would spoil the whole effect of the declamation. It is for this reason that oratory, whether in the law courts or in a Parliamentary assembly, can never, as a perfect model of style, enter into competition with works composed in solitude with a pen in the author's hand. There was indeed a period of transition, before Parliamentary reporting attained its present efficiency—namely the latter years of the 18th century—during which the great efforts of oratory as we now possess them—for instance those of Burke—were handed down to posterity in the form in which they were transcribed before delivery. Now-a-days some speeches suffer as much as others gain at the hands of reporters; but in the great press of business, which every year presses more hardly upon our legislators, men have discovered, that the finest speech that could be made could not change a single vote. It is well that it should be so: there is more danger of party action in an assembly where the

tongue of the orator bears a triumphant sway, than in one to which the deciding body comes with its mind made up beforehand, even though it is blindly following the call of a party leader or its own rooted prejudice : this statement is sufficiently proved true by the perversions of justice in Ancient Athens and Modern France. But in the early days of English forensic oratory, it was probably not so ; when St. John spoke the influence exercised by his pleading was probably much greater than it could have been after Walpole's systematic corruption had done its work.

The most able criticism of the 18th century was Johnson's ; he may be called in fact the first really systematic critic of English literature ; for, although his remarks on other authors are scattered all about his own miscellaneous writings, it may be confidently stated that he made criticism his profession, and earned his living by it. He is an important link in the chain of English prose writers, for he is the first author whose whole thoughts were turned to the works of his predecessors. Modern literature may be said to have a double function, production, and criticism ; and great as have been the efforts of the Victorian age in the former direction, its chief work has lain in the latter. It is only now that we are learning the full value of our great English classical authors ; and Samuel Johnson was the founder of this art of criticism. In accordance with the still somewhat measured and pedantic ideas of his day, his studies were directed chiefly to giving judgments on style rather than on matter, for prose writing, despite the dictum of the great sage himself with which I have ventured to commence this essay, was still chiefly valued for beauties of style. It was not practised by any means in so narrow a spirit, and Johnson's contemporaries, Goldsmith and Burke, were the most powerful agents in breaking down the conventional barriers.

Johnson adopted Swift's definition of good poetical style—"the use of proper words in proper places" as a canon of criticism for good prose style also ; but his own style, although it was probably laboriously formed so as to be true to this rule, strikes a modern reader as too conscious an effort—too over-burdened with Latinisms, and phrases which are only intelligible to cultivated men, to suit the new era which was beginning to dawn. His own defence of such a style, even if he had lived much later, would be, that great dignity was necessary for prose composition. In accordance with this idea he set himself to purify the English language, and thought that he had, by his importation of new and rejection of old phrases, considerably added to its beauty. One of the most effective tricks of style which was introduced by him was, the laying down

of one brief dictum on a subject first, and the subsequent amplification in one or more longer sentences. In this he has been most happily imitated by Macaulay. This is often useful for purposes of exposition, but it also shews at times a tendency towards artificial bolstering, which ought always to be avoided. Beyond a few mannerisms of this kind, and his use in some^f of his compositions of an excessive quantity of Latinism, there seems to be little reason for the coining of such an unpleasing word as "Johnsonese." The name was really given rather to what was believed to be the style of his conversation rather than to anything which he gave to the world in print. He was one of the few people who talked even more pompously than they wrote.

Edmund Burke. No really new era in English prose was inaugurated by Edmund Burke, although Mr. Payne in the prefaces to his two volumes of "Selections from Burke" would fain have us believe the contrary.^g A truer estimate of Burke is given by De Quincey when he calls him "the supreme writer of the century." In the field of mere style Burke is indeed supreme, and his writings mark the highest point reached by the high tide of 18th century literature. It is only because in his slightly visionary philanthropic schemes and speeches he belonged to a future time, that Mr. Payne is led into believing that he inaugurated the new epoch of literature in England, which rather began contemporaneously with the active carrying out of those schemes, some of which Burke's early liberalism had advocated. To eulogise too highly Burke's beauty of language would be impossible; his use of metaphors is as abundant and varied as could be desired, and yet these are always kept from running wild. In pathos he is unrivalled, or rivalled only by Thackeray; in passion his notes are really like those of a thrilling musical instrument. Though he is advisedly jocular at times, it is with a somewhat lumbering jocosity, and he is never really humorous; we must not look for humour in a man who was so entirely out of harmony with his contemporaries, and so generally unfortunate in his political career as Burke was. Mr. Payne describes Burke's writings as a mixture of Bolingbroke's splendour with Johnson's common sense. This is fair and good, and it is, perhaps, the highest praise that can be bestowed upon an author of that time. It is well known

^f It is only in his earlier writings that Johnson is over Latinised in style. "Rasselas" was written in 1759, and that marks the change to a more Teutonic idiom. The "Lives of the Poets" is hardly more Latinised than the writings of his contemporaries.

^g Mr. Payne goes so far as to say that we are indebted to Burke for the "Saturday Review" style; that he introduced a fresher and more natural diction; that he was to prose what Wordsworth was to poetry. "He fell naturally into that manner which was adapted to take hold of the practical English mind, and he brought that manner at once to perfection."—[*Select Works*, p. xxxiv. *Intro.*]

that he modelled his early publication, "A Vindication of Natural Society," closely on the style of Bolingbroke, whose deism it was meant to satirise. The "Vindication" professed to be written "by a late noble Lord," and many admirers of Bolingbroke, besides most of his enemies, fell into the net which the young writer had so cunningly spread. Burke is attractive to modern taste because he speaks to his readers more from a footing of equality than any contemporary writer; he appeals as from man to man, and he appeals with the most persuasive eloquence, with the most easy fluency; it would seem at first sight impossible to resist his fascinations. We possess in Burke's own words a description of his education in eloquence. He made himself a speaker by steeping himself in the words of the great classical authors of the English language no less than of those of antiquity. He tells that it was from the splendid pulpit orators of the 17th century that he learned his earliest lessons. But his command of language and acquaintance with good models was such that he could imitate now one now another of his great predecessors with indifference almost with unconsciousness. He talked, we know, as he wrote, and declaimed passionately. Johnson speaks of the dramatic character of Burke's conversation; if he is dramatic, it is because the theatre was in his day, what it has since ceased to be, a great school of life, manners, and even of rhetoric. This is why Burke spoke so much of admiring Plautus and Terence. Bolingbroke was still more truly a dramatic writer as he was a more dramatic personage altogether.

Why then with all these advantages in favour of Burke is there always something which makes one sigh as one reads his finest speeches? It is because, as I said above, the orator is out of harmony with his age. We place ourselves unconsciously on the ministerial benches, and feel with Mr. Pitt that all this magnificent rhetoric will not need an answer. Mr. Payne is wrong when he says that Burke had anything in common with the practical English mind. He may have been, he often was, more noble than his contemporaries, but the work of the world has fallen, and perhaps happily, to politicians like Pitt rather than to orators and visionaries like Burke. I think the career of the latter is one of the saddest in the whole of English history.

Two writers of very different style, both contemporaries of Burke, may next be considered,—Edward Gibbon and Oliver Goldsmith. A more complete contrast than exists between the two could not be imagined. For writing Gibbon's style, as Mr. Bagehot says,^h we may imagine as necessities, a comfortable arm-chair before a blazing library-fire, with plenty of pens, clear ink, and fresh paper: the "Letters of

Edward Gibbon.

the *Citizen of the world*" might have been scrawled on the edges of old news-sheets and the backs of unpaid bills. But it would be wrong to condemn hastily the "ponderous majesty of the philosophical historian of the Roman Empire," (Gibbon would probably have described his own literary excellence in some such terms), because we are more attracted by the delicate grace of him "qui nihil tetigit quod non ornavit." Gibbon is never out of livery; "his style is typical," says Mr. Bagehot, in the same essay, "of the age which could tolerate the petty ceremonies and pomps of Versailles. His involutions and his attempts at humour are painful, his sarcasms are malevolent and coarse, without piercing the victim in a tender part. Events are darkly hinted at rather than lucidly explained; and the most curious and exact knowledge of the periods of which he treats—and such knowledge Gibbon undoubtedly possessed—is unfortunately for posterity involved in a succession of enigmatic clauses and lumbering rhetorical paragraphs. But the worst fault of which Gibbon can be justly accused is the not infrequent occurrence of slips in his grammatical construction, such as are doubly censurable when committed by a man who prided himself as much upon the classical balance of his sentences as upon the classical purity of his diction.

When we turn to Goldsmith we see the very opposite of all this. The most thoughtful, the most gentle, the most truly humourous of all the writers of his age or of any age, he is, on the whole, the most attractive figure in our literary history. He has touched every kind of composition, history, poetry, drama, fiction, and criticism, and he has touched them all with a master's hand. The greater part of his writings were miscellaneous "hack work" for different booksellers, for his engagements with these gentlemen usually terminated abruptly. Goldsmith is an Addison with a rich vein of true poetry and true compassion added. The pleasure derived from the style of his writings is akin to that derived from reading the "Spectator;" the later writer is equally polished and more metaphorical, or rather his metaphors are derived more from actual life than Addison's. We feel that to him writing could have been no effort whatever, whereas Addison must have sat down to compose his "Spectators" much as he would to compose his beautiful Latin verses. Each is the man

"Qui mores hominum multorum vidit et urbes."

The difference between them lies in the spirit with which they have looked upon these things. Goldsmith's humour and pathos are both beyond all praise. Who has not been moved almost to tears by the affecting comicality of Beau Tibbs? Who would be ashamed to confess that he has been upset by one or two passages in that perfect little human epic, the *Vicar of Wakefield*? The description of London misery in the "Letters of the Citizen of

the World" proves conclusively that the art of pathetic touches lies in their rarity. Goldsmith's mind was of such a happy equable temperament that he avoided every trace of the sickly sentimentality which, it is to be feared, took the place of active benevolence among some writers of the day.ⁱ He is at the head of the novelists of the century; his pen was pure without the pruderries which are apparent in the earlier leaders of the reaction against Smollett and Fielding. In style, as in matter, Goldsmith's armour is proof against all the arrows of criticism, yet no writer was ever more careless of the estimation in which his works would be held by posterity.

Among the authors of the period who do not strictly speaking contribute to the development of English prose literature, but of whom, as masters of their own particular style, one cannot omit some notice, are Horace Walpole and "Junius," who is usually supposed to have been Sir Philip Francis. Letter writing can, as a rule, as little as pamphlet writing, be considered as genuinely model style, on account of the numerous allusions to people and events, known perhaps only to the writer and the recipient of the letter. Therefore epistolary correspondence is an art in itself, and is not in any direct way connected with our subject. Of Walpole one can only say that he considered correspondence one of the necessary arts for a fine gentleman's education, and rather complacently reflected that he was the only professor of the art in King George's dominions. Junius' violent attacks on the various public characters, who happened to be of opposite political opinions to himself, or to have privately offended him, are certainly something more than mere letters. In spirit they carry us back to the warfare of Milton and Salmasius: in language and style they abound in the most polished phrases of antitheses of which the English language is capable. But real beauty of diction they want: they are hard and "glittering." The author is as inferior to Burke in his diction—and it is interesting to notice that Francis, and it is probable that Francis and Junius are the same persons, actually accused Burke of writing bad English^j—as he is in loftiness of character: there is no real flow of words in the letters; we feel that they are too surcharged with venom to let the author's real meaning come to the surface; and a style in which much of the writer's mind is kept back from appearing on his paper cannot be recommended for imitation.

And now the second great change in the development of our prose literature is close at hand. At the end of the 18th century, in the

Letter writing.

Horace Walpole.

Junius.

End of the second period.

ⁱ e.g., Sterne—Miss Burney.

^j Burke's Correspondence, vol. iii. p. 164.

intense excitement caused by the foreign war and the breaking up all around us of the mediæval conditions of Europe, we may see, if we please to be fanciful, an analogy with the circumstances which accompanied the first great change in the course of English style. Now, as then, it seemed likely that the fabric of English society would be overthrown, and that the reign of democracy in our island, instead of being slowly matured in proportion to the education of the people, would be inaugurated in the overwhelming

Social upheaval threatened in England at the end of the 18th century.

at a blow of that aristocratic constitution which had up till that time felt little indication of the coming change. Literature was dormant for a while, for every one of the literary classes felt

that the possibility of a revolution was a serious matter: Burke only raised his warning voice; and his splendid "Reflections on the French Revolution" was perhaps the one work of his which was well received by the nation at the time of its publication. When the reaction from this terror came in the opening years of the present century, the awakening sense of a few daring members of the Liberal party spoke out. Their voices inaugurated a new period of English style as soon as the peace, and the prosperity that followed on the peace, gave people leisure to demand a literature suited to the new conditions of England.

Third period. III.—In 1802 the "Edinburgh Review" was first started, and this was the commencement of the new era of English prose. This era may be termed the educational period. Prose is no longer among the fine arts, no longer a mere profession by which a scanty living can be picked

The prose literature of the Magazines and the Reviews. up, and here and there great prizes obtained, but has become a sober, active, and self-devoting factor in the instruction of the English people. The

demand for literature of this class must have been infinitesimal at the first appearance of the "Edinburgh Review," but had there been no demand for such an appeal to a more extended audience there could have been no supply. The Reviews have now become a necessity of our age. Men have so little time to form judgments for themselves that they must be told by authoritative and, as it were, licensed public instructors "what to think." The "Spectator" and the "Tatler" at the opening of the last century were on a scale so much smaller, and were written for such a much smaller society of men and books,—if one may be permitted to use such an expression—that they had really little effect in this direction. But they are, for all that, the parents of the modern reviews and magazines, as much as Defoe's "Review" and Swift's "Examiner" are the parents of modern newspapers.

The "Saturday Review" style. The modern English style of prose writing—the "Saturday Review" style—is lineally descended from the style of the first Edinburgh Reviewers. It is considered by some great writers of the present

day a deterioration from the style of Burke and of his contemporaries ; and as far as the use of beautiful phrases and metaphors, and the exciting of the emotions of the readers by similar artifices go, this accusation is quite true. But this is far from being a cause of blame, if we regard the end of pure writing to be the education of the people rather than the tickling of the senses of the erudite. Plain facts are dressed by our best modern writers in the most appropriate—that is the plainest—language. If the sentences are not involved, and the syntax is perfectly clear, we ask no more ; indeed we have time for no more in the busy life of modern England.

The cool self-complacent style of the reviewer, who is generally anonymous, is of course open to Danger of Review style. censure ; but freedom of criticism is such an incalculable benefit that it probably outweighs the unfortunate results which may have attended it in some instances. Reviewers have been accused of causing the death of sensitive poets^k : and most people remember the famous commencement of an article on Wordsworth in the “Edinburgh Review.”¹ Such faults as these communicate themselves along with the plain and practical style of the Reviewers, even to writers like Macaulay, in their longer works ; and to a greater or less degree to every prose writer of the present day, with the exceptions of Mr. Ruskin and the late Mr. Carlyle. These, as the apostles of quite new and quite other doctrines of literature, I reserve for future consideration. It will be necessary to say first a few words on the style of the great leaders of this literary revolution, such as De Quincey and Macaulay.

Francis Jeffrey and Sidney Smith are among the most vigorous, Professor Wilson and Charles Lamb among the most refined and contemplative, of the writers who consciously or unconsciously have belonged to the new school, for it is a school which includes within its boundaries all varieties of thought, manner, and expression. But the great representatives of the two extremes which can live together within this pale are Thomas de Quincey and Lord Macaulay. They are respectively the heads of the “abstract school” and the “concrete school.”

The first Edinburgh
Reviewers and
other contem-
porary writers.

^k “Who killed John Keats?”
“I,” says the *Quarterly*,
So savage and tartarly,
“Twas one of my feats!”

Byron, *Letter to Murray*, 1821, July 30th.

(This is attributed in the letter *in jest* to Shelley. “Are you aware,” says Byron, “that Shelley has written an Elegy on Keats, and accuses the ‘Quarterly’ of killing him?”)

¹ “This will never do,” *Edinburgh Review*, November, 1814, vol. xxiv. p. 1.

Thomas de Quincey.
The 'abstract' school

The former of these had a perfect genius for writing about the most trivial subjects in the of style. most perspicuous and lively language. He possessed a mind steeped in the classical literature of Greece and Rome, but he infinitely preferred to the masterpieces of these languages the writings of the English Augustan age of the early 17th century: he devoted himself to the study of various styles with the greatest care; and yet with all these qualifications for being a mere stylist, a mere survival of the "Classic age," he is an essentially modern writer; that is, he writes for the third period of English audiences. The fact is that it came perfectly natural to him to write as he did; there is no smile of satisfaction on his face as he puts down a curiously turned sentence, for all his thoughts seem to have presented themselves to him slightly inverted. It was, perhaps, rather a misfortune that a man who had such power of expression, together with such a wide range of reading as De Quincey, should have such an obliquity of intellect. The obliquity of itself is not uncommon; but it is uncommon to find it in company with the other qualities. His writings are never pleasing to a vigorous mind, for the reason that there is a temptation to regret that these magnificent powers existed in combination with such inability for real seriousness of purpose. But his criticism and his lighter articles were all employed to some extent for the object of the magazine writers of the period; they served to combine amusement with instruction, and were useful ingredients in the *pot-pourri* of a Review.

De Quincey's great fault is that he is too fond of putting on paper abstract ideas; he will nearly always explain them, if they are obscure, afterwards, for he will not willingly leave his readers in ignorance of anything which he knows himself; but still it is a grave fault in style to make too constant a use either of abstractions or the reverse. He is melodious and even in his language; exceedingly tranquil and contemplative in his sentences; careful to explain to an uneducated reader the meaning of a quotation, to repeat in a different form a statement which appears the least involved. He is humorous to the verge of absurdity, pathetic to the verge of sentimentality, according as his strangely constituted physical nature impels him to laugh or to weep; he is extraordinarily "felicitous" in the words that occur to his mind, and though sparing of metaphor, when he does use one it is sure to be striking and illuminating to the reader. Let us take one short instance of his command over the refinements, both metaphorical and direct, of the English language.

"So thick a curtain of manners is drawn over the features and "expression of men's natures, that to the ordinary observer the "two extremities and the infinite field of varieties which lie "between them are all confounded, the vast and multitudinous

"compass of their several harmonies reduced to the meagre outline "of differences expressed in the gamut or alphabet of elementary "sounds." (*Confessions*, p. 34).

This passage may not seem to be particularly likely to be clear to the uneducated reader, but it is in the succeeding sentences so carefully illustrated and explained that it may be taken as typical of his "educational" style. There is no sententiousness about his work, which one would be tempted to think on a hasty review was the case. But he acted as a powerful influence in preventing English prose literature from becoming vulgarised, which is a very possible consequence of an exceedingly popular style. He kept off colloquialisms and Americanisms, and (to use a colloquialism which he would have abhorred) put a "drag" on his contemporaries.

Macaulay, though he is careful to avoid vulgarity, was the very opposite of a thoughtful writer. His own command over the English language was scarcely less than De Quincey's, and he also wrote for the purpose of instructing his readers. Unfortunately he did not always make sure of his facts, enough to carry this purpose into effect. He is the writer who represents to M. Taine the best type of English men of letters; one can easily imagine the impression which a Frenchman of liberal opinions would derive from Macaulay's brilliant and often flippant generalisations. This fault of his is well illustrated by Mr. Bagehot—a modern critic, himself sometimes nearly as flippant as Macaulay himself—when he says that the sweeping criticisms which we meet with in the "Essays" are "not suited to such a being as man in such a world as the present." Certainly they are eminently unsuited to such a task as the writing of history.

But we are not concerned with criticism of the matter of Macaulay's works; and his language and style has always been accepted as a standard of excellence since his death. When a Reviewer wishes to describe the ambition of a youthful stylist, he says, "This man fancies himself a Macaulay." His name will always be connected with the most fascinating series of letters that has been published in the present century. His speeches in the House of Commons are remembered as the most vehement and persuasive, except those of Burke and Canning, of any that have been uttered since Parliamentary oratory has been addressed to the audience of the nation. And to the most pleasure-seeking reader an essay of his will always be as delightful "pabulum" as the best novel conceivable. This power of Macaulay's style over all classes of minds is owing entirely to the vivid manner in which he represents events to the eyes of his readers; to his abjuration of all abstractions, and his choice of concrete expressions. We feel that he has acted through to himself the scenes which he describes; that he

Lord Macaulay.
The concrete school
of style.

might have lived among the men and women of the court of Charles II., and been present at the secret negotiations of the leaders of the country party. Alas ! a closer acquaintance with the original authorities dissipates this delightful sensation of confidence, and it is for this reason that Macaulay is so dangerous a writer, and that his statements are to be so carefully divested of their adventitious ornament before we can meet them in a properly critical spirit.

He is master of one particular literary weapon, namely the short sentence ; he does not treat us to long periods, whether of plainer or obscurer meaning, but he astonishes us with a series of brilliant rushes or sallies following close upon each other, often epexegetical, and often merely of the same force one with another. Frequently he will argue in this manner for some time, and then introduce at the end of a string of such sentences the one for which all that preceded have been merely a preparation. For instance :—

“ Some states have been enabled by their geographical position to defend themselves with advantage against immense force. “ The sea has repeatedly protected England against the fury of “ the whole continent. The Venetian government driven from its “ possessions on the land, could still bid defiance to the confederates of Cambray from the Arsenal amidst the lagoons. More “ than one great and well-appointed army, which regarded the “ peasants of Switzerland as an easy prey, has perished in the “ passes of the Alps. Frederick had no such advantage.”^m

And then follows a fresh series of sentences explanatory of the deficiencies of the Prussian kingdom. In pursuing this method Macaulay nearly always distributes the “ protasis ” and “ apodosis ” between two sentences. He makes less use of conjunctions than any other writer ; his mood is always the indicative. It is most truly a very readable if a very dangerous style.

Between these two opposite poles of modern English style, Macaulay and de Quincey, the dashing and the contemplative, the concrete and the abstract, every variety and shade of writing may be found. Those authors are most to be admired who steer a middle course between the two, avoiding the faults of each. It is quite possible to write as pure and as constructive English as de Quincey wrote without following too closely his excessively abstract manner of expressing himself. I do not feel equally sure that it is easy to compose with anything like Macaulay’s brilliancy and make sure at the same time of the ground traversed. The leading articles in many of the London papers are a striking example of an attempt to be “ trenchant ” which cannot be said to be very successful.

^m *Essay on Frederick the Great.*

But most of the great writers of the last generation, and still more those of the present, have been in their apprenticeship to literature, contributors to periodicals.ⁿ I have not touched much upon the development of the style of the English novel, partly because I cannot speak from a close acquaintance with the great novelists of the last century, and partly because fiction is not a very enduring nor very important part of our literature.

The Novelists.

It is of its very nature transient, and the taste for it transient, and to a certain extent un-English ; but there are one or two great writers of this century who have been, through their works of fiction, guides and leaders of the national taste. Such are Sir Walter Scott, Dickens, and Thackeray. In fiction, more than in any other kind of composition, the mind of the author is reflected on his pages. In each of these men this rule is fully exemplified.

Sir Walter Scott.

Sir Walter Scott, one might say, is rather too fond of abstract ideas (as is not unusually the case among his countrymen), his syntax is cumulative rather than constructive or antithetical ; his metaphors are homely ; but to most people it would seem as vain and almost as impious to attempt to comment on the style of the *Waverley Novels* as to criticise *Holy Writ*. The only judgment that can be passed upon them is this : they have afforded greater pleasure to a larger circle of English readers than any book which has ever been published in our language ; they have ennobled and refined the national taste ; they have reconciled the most scrupulous puritans to fiction, a work which not even Goldsmith was able to accomplish ; and they have done all this as much through the charm of their style as through their matter. Their humour is indeed of that open and lively nature, which even those who would miss all the meaning of the satire of Thackeray cannot fail to appreciate ; and their pathos is equally persuasive because it appeals to feelings common to every human being.

When we approach the other two great novelists we have no such universal admiration to take the place of criticism. Neither of them are writers whose books are a treasured possession of every English household. Some people cannot bear to read a line of one, some of the other : indeed, as was said of the disciples of two famous philosophers of antiquity, the world might be divided into those who appreciate Thackeray and those who appreciate Dickens. The pathos and the humour of each is extolled by their respective admirers as the most wonderful in all literature.

M. Taine is, I think, on the whole, fair in estimating the respective merits of the two styles ;

Dickens.

ⁿ A notable instance of a man whose style has been thus formed is Cardinal Newman. [See his articles in the "British Quarterly."]

although to the ears of a disciple his praise of Thackeray seems too qualified. He shews well that Dickens' was an excitable, poetical, "elegiac" temperament, with a strong obliquity of perception and a strong taste for paradox ; that consequently he is always hurrying his audience into laughter and tears on subjects, which seem to minds, which cannot fall in with these peculiar trains of thought, unworthy of such excitement. The audience, however, if they happen to be at all excitable, cannot help giving way, as the Dramatic Power and word painting of Dickens is so great that it takes them by storm. Those people who do not give way at all will in all probability shudder as much at the hideous grotesque scene as at those of the audience who are bowing down and worshipping. This dramatic power, then, in Dickens, was infinite, and he had explored such peculiar scenes, and made himself acquainted with such peculiar characters (all of which he distorted in his own fancy through the peculiar "obliquity of intellect"), that he needs no beauty of thought to produce effect on his audience. Where he does see beauty it is quite a different kind from that which anyone else would see ; it consists in the details of that which is unobserved in the hurry of ordinary life. He is the Hogarth of literature as well in his awful realism, his love for detail, of which nobody else will take account, as in his compassion for the oppressed and his burning vials of wrath poured upon the head of the oppressor.

Thackeray is in the most perfect contrast to this man ; though he, too, has a hatred of oppression, his invective against it is concealed under a cynical smile. It is more effective, for depraved people hate polished ridicule more than stinging abuse. But Thackeray does not concern himself with the same kind of depravity as Dickens : he aims less at open sin, and more at ostentation and meanness ; consequently his style is more refined, and makes its effect more by a single cutting remark in the middle of much amiable laughter, than by page after page of heart-rending description of the miseries which sin entails upon the world. His periods are thus more polished and flowing ; his cynical smile is ever on his lips, and yet that smile covers infinite tenderness for the whole human family. M. Taine cannot see this hidden meaning, nor the depth of Thackeray's mind, which he admits to be singularly well cultivated, singularly acute, and free from any trace of obliquity. Thackeray does not delight in paradox ; he does not seek for victims and protégés in "Nooks and Corners of Character ;" his subjects are the men and women of the higher classes of English Society ; and he exposes their weaknesses with a ludicrous gravity, which is beyond anything else, in the way of satire, effective. No one after reading his books would dare to descend to one of those little tricks which he has shewn up so mercilessly. His pathos, because entirely true to human nature, and because in

its outward expression very rare, is unrivalled, and there runs too throughout all his works a tender unexpressed pity for the frailties of man, which was the result of no conscious effort of style, but rather a peculiar habit of mind which never left him.

Articles for the newspapers or magazines are now nearly always the first thing to which a novice in literature turns his hand. They are necessarily hasty, but they are obliged to be correct in the main as to the facts, and correct also in style, for there is a host of critics constantly on the watch for any slip in the paces of a contemporary. This style of writing develops great fluency and ease in the use of the pen, but it also tends to stifle any very exact or laborious thought. There are, however, two great masters of the English language—if not of style—who have set their faces against the prevailing taste of the day. The one is Mr. Ruskin, the other alas ! the late Mr. Carlyle. Each of these writers is at the head of a small school of cultivated men, but both are out of harmony with the present line of development of English prose, which up to their time has been continuous in one direction.

Mr. Ruskin's style is varied, sweet, and musical ; he avows in one of his prefaces that he conscientiously endeavoured to imitate the rhythmical cadences of Hooker ; he charms us every now and then by some beautiful metaphor fresh gathered from nature. Such metaphors, his chief subject, art criticism, enables him to introduce with great effect. For instance take the following quotation from his lecture on Tuscan art :—

“ And instead of this decorative evangelical preacher of a lion “ with staring eyes and its paw on a gospel, he carves you a quite “ brutal and maternal lioness, with affectionate eyes and paw set “ on her cub.”^o

The idea here is very beautiful, and it brings the picture of the lioness in the Pisan pulpit very vividly before our eyes : but it is not a chaste style ; there is too great a tendency to accumulate epithets, and too free a use of adverbs, to make the passage altogether pleasing to a modern ear. Together with this antiquated delight in piling up epithets, Mr. Ruskin combines a peculiarly colloquial turn of sentence ; he is fond of reasoning by means of a conjunction like “then” placed at the end of an argument. For lecturing in public, no one who has not heard his lectures can form any idea of the delight which this style affords to the ears of those who listen reverently ; but as a mere question of prose style one cannot help feeling that his writings are at once too colloquial in construction and too antiquated in language to be a valuable addition to the chain of our English authors.

Literature of the present day.

Two writers in opposition to the prevailing taste of the day.

Mr. Ruskin.

Expressions like the "preacher of a lion," above quoted, and also such Germanisms as "quite brutal," "entirely holy," are decidedly foreign to the genius of the English language. Mr. Ruskin himself would probably say that the style of the present day needs reform, and reform in the direction of reaction towards the great Elizabethan models; but his own free use of colloquialisms has prevented him from effecting any such reform even if he has desired to do so.

Mr. Carlyle. The question, "What is the influence of Mr. Carlyle's style on the development of English prose?" is closely connected with a still more important question: "To what end is English prose style now tending?"

The influence of America on diction. Is it preserving a plain and practical but chaste diction and constructive syntax, or is it wandering in the direction of loose Americanisms in diction and in syntax towards the German models of which Mr. Carlyle is an avowed admirer? On the score of diction, then, in answer to these questions, there does seem to be some occasion for fear lest our language may be corrupted by an influx of those peculiar loose words and phrases, which are classed as Americanisms; for instance, "reliable" which is an ungrammatical word. Our isolation from the continent is daily growing less and less marked, and there is a decided tendency to admit into our conversation, whence they will surely penetrate into our writings, a great many foreign words, such for instance as "opportunism" and "particularism," two convenient political terms imported from France. We use these words at first unconsciously with reference to the concerns of other countries, but such will inevitably become grafted upon the English language if ever an "opportunist" policy should unfortunately become necessary in England.^p But we have a great many wisely pedantic guardians of our native tongue who are ever crying out against these and similar abuses.

And the influence of Germany on English syntax. With regard to Mr. Carlyle and the German syntax the case is different. M. Taine will not help us much here; he is of course lost in amazement at such a peculiarly "Teutonic phenomenon" as Mr. Carlyle: he gazes at him as at the relic of some primeval world; but is far from appreciating either the true bent of his genius, or the true effect of his writings on the development of English prose. That effect has no doubt been very powerful, and Mr. Carlyle would fain have had it more powerful still. The languages of England, France, and Germany are represented at the present day by three distinct styles. The French sentence is usually short, polished, antithetical, contains only one proposition, and is of equal length with the sentence that precedes and that which follows. It

^p Some people would be inclined to say that English politics, or at least English legislation, is always conducted on opportunist principles.

abounds in pithy epigrams. The German sentence is peculiarly long, heavy, and cumulative ; even in the best writers like Von Rauke it is utterly regardless of "arsis" and "rheticus;" it expresses its subordinate meanings rather by epithets than by short relative clauses ; and consequently it is often very much involved and not suited to the comprehension of any but well educated men. It is not an uncommon thing to find Germans of average education unable to master the intricate labyrinthine style of writers of their own language. English prose literature has hitherto combined the advantages of the French and German styles without the drawbacks of either. The English sentence contains often more than one swell and cadence, often mixed metaphors, and is often of unequal length with the preceding and following sentences ; but in the works of good writers it is never involved, and ought never to contain any allusions which are not fully explained in subordinate clauses or separate sentences. It uses frequent relatives rather than expressive epithets and participles ; it is eminently analytical. Mr. Saintsbury says that, before the time of Dryden, only the absence of inflexions saved our language from sharing the fate of the German and "involving itself almost beyond reach of extrication :" but this seems to be a hasty statement founded on the manifest fondness of Milton for Latin synthetical constructions. Enough it was saved ; and there is little danger that Mr. Carlyle's influence will lead it astray again. We can admire and reverence Mr. Carlyle's great work without imitating his mannerism of speech.

This mannerism arises from his intense eagerness and impatience to present a thought to his readers in the most forcible words of which he can lay hold : he cannot wait to construct a sentence, but will give his ideas to the world just as they came rushing pell mell on his brain. One almost wonders how he ever endured the inevitable delay which must occur in putting thoughts on paper. It cannot be denied that this style is exceedingly forcible and picturesque as it was meant to be. Most people know the history of the French Revolution chiefly through his flashing and vivid description of the details, and of the characters ; but his head-strong and passionate nature has committed him to faults in history, hardly less glaring than Macaulay's.

Mr. Carlyle's mannerism.

Mr. Carlyle probably gave little or no thought to his style ; he talked, we are told, in even more peculiar phrases than he wrote. His humour is genuine if somewhat Titanic ; his "Teufelsdroeckh laughter" has passed into a by-word, and moves all except the most fastidious minds ; his pathos moves all. One might search far in English literature without finding a finer passage, either in beauty of idea or expression than the subjoined quotation from *Sartor Resartus* :—

“ Silence as of death ; for midnight even in the Arctic latitudes
“ has its character ; nothing but the granite cliffs ruddy tinged,
“ and the peaceable gurgle of that slow-heaving Polar ocean ; over
“ which in the utmost north the great sun hangs low and lazy, as
“ if he too were slumbering. Yet is his cloud couch wrought of
“ crimson and cloth of gold ; yet does his light stream over the
“ mirror of waters like a tremulous fire-pillar, starting downwards
“ to the abyss, and hide itself under my feet. In such moments
“ solitude also is invaluable ; for who would speak or be looked
“ upon when behind him lies all Europe and Africa fast asleep,
“ except the watchmen, and before him the silent immensity and
“ palace of the Eternal, whereof our sun is but a porch-lamp.”

I have ventured to give this quotation at some length, because it is a really good specimen of what Mr. Carlyle's style is capable of when he is least led astray by eccentricity. But even here he indulges in a peculiarly inverted order of words, and an omission of verbs, which, though striking and pictorial, is displeasing to an educated English ear.

The guidance which our best modern prose writers are following is a different one from this of Mr. Carlyle ; there is hardly a book published, by anyone who can be considered at all qualified to be an author, which does not make use of chaste and even diction, and a perspicuous and terse grammatical construction. To such an end all the changes which have been effected throughout the history of English prose literature have been directed ; there has been one constant effort to make diction simpler, while preserving its purity, and to make sentences comprehensible without sacrificing grammar to the desire for pictorial effect. Since 1660, at the latest, all authors who have consciously turned their attention to the improvement of either of these two elements of style, Dryden, Johnson, Burke, and the early Edinburgh Reviewers have all formed links in the same chain. It is a chain which, although one may be tempted to think that we have now reached the maximum of simplicity, compatible with avoidance of vulgar colloquialism, is even being forged at the present hour ; a chain, the continuity of which reflects the highest honour upon the self-restraint and reasoning faculty of English prose authors.

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The development of English prose style



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